



SAD in the Anthropocene: Brenda Hillman's Ecopoetics of Affect

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on three collections of poetry by California poet Brenda Hillman, *Cascadia*, *Practical Water*, and *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, reading for the ways in which the poems model an affective interrelation between human and environment. These three works each focus on a traditional element (earth, water, air) in order to explore its co-constitution with the human, treating the element as active, or, in Jane Bennett's term, "vibrant matter." In the Anthropocene, it is no longer an "intentional fallacy" to attribute human emotions to the environment or its elements. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is used throughout the article as a way to conceptualise this interrelation of human with environment; SAD suggests that in this era human and environment alike are disordered. I argue that, rather than staging a lyric subject regarding a landscape, Hillman's poems create a confusion of subject/object and foreground/background relations in which the origins of affects are impossible to determine and harms circulate. Affect is vital in understanding human motivations in relation to climate change, and Hillman's ecopoetic practice is an example of how we can shift our understanding of our affective relationship to the environment. Linguistic experimentation can shift awareness toward an understanding of the link between "what it felt like to have been a subject" and "what it felt like to have been earth" as well as what it feels like now to be indeterminately both, intertwined and in crisis.

*There was a hurt that lay between two colors.
a shade not resolved in the mind
because it is the mind.²*

In "Dioxin Sunset," "a hurt" appears "between two colors." This "hurt" is an affect that remains vaguely blended with colors and even with "the mind" itself, not yet "resolved," narrativised, or made sense of. A negative affect, "hurt" indicates a harm being done to the body by a toxin in the environment, but the mind can only sense, rather than completely grasp, its kind or extent, lasting, as it will, past the span of a single human lifetime. Too close for comfort, the "hurt" is a "shade" that composes the very matter of the mind, a harm shared by body and environment. The colors of a sunset, a typically 'natural' image, in this poem, evoke the gradations of color in 'unnatural' medical imaging, highlighting the linguistic technology

¹ Brenda Hillman, *Cascadia* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 14.

² Hillman, *Cascadia*, 24.

through which the 'natural' is constructed. These lines distill Brenda Hillman's eco-poetics of affect, a poetics I will anchor to the simultaneously ecological and affective concept of SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) in my reading of her "elements" series.³

Hillman's poems repeatedly stage attempts at healing or wholeness that remain unsuccessful in light of the equally damaged environment in which healing might take place. As such, her work is concerned as much with what Heather Houser calls "eco-sickness" as with our place in the Anthropocene. But what is the role of poetry in this era? Poetry might be defined as language with a heightened capacity to affect and to be affected; this can include the capacity to be affected by things and by the environment, as well as the capacity to affect things and the environment. Poetic language involves an attunement to things and to environment that can be helpful in understanding our era of increasingly intense interrelation of human and environment known as the Anthropocene. In the Anthropocene an awareness of the effects of human history on natural history (and vice versa) has made it difficult to continue to distinguish human actor from passive environment. The field of eco-poetics explores the potentials of poetic language to model or apprehend ecological dynamics, especially in light of current realities like climate change. Writing in the *Eco Language Reader*, a collection of essays promoting a language-oriented approach to eco-poetics, Marcella Durand addresses the role of poetry in this changed environment:

Things have changed since the last burst of ecological poetry in the 1960s and 1970s [. . .] Nature has changed from a perceptually exploitable Other—most easily compared to a book to be decoded by the (human) reader—to something intrinsically affected by humans. We ourselves are the wilderness destroying the very systems of which we were a part, in a role we utterly do not understand.⁴

Rather than looking for resources to be metaphorically exploited, an eco-poet seeks to abandon the (gendered) concept of Nature and resolves that "[t]he world is not raw material for humanization."⁵ Contesting the definition of nature as passive backdrop involves finding a materially grounded poetics that demonstrates how this definition has never been a full or satisfactory account of the world. Eco-poetics, I argue, illuminates Hillman's project and situates it within contemporary poetics. Hillman is interested in our role in the disordered weather of climate change, noting, for example, in *Practical Water*, "Unusually warm global warming day out"⁶; her work with form serves to *let in* the "global warming" day, allowing it to affectively transform the language through which 'nature' has been understood. Because we warm the atmosphere, we *feel* warm; there is no room for dispassionate distance and we must relate to climate change as we once related to weather. Such a realisation of our interconnectedness with the environment is less utopian (ironically or otherwise), than forced upon us by our role in climate change, and this happens as an affective process.

³ *Cascadia, Pieces of Air in the Epic, and Practical Water*.

⁴ Marcella Durand, "The Ecology of Poetry," in *The Eco Language Reader*, ed. Brenda Iijima (New York: Nightboat Books, 2010), 114-124.

⁵ Donna Haraway "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 Autumn (1988): 575-599.

⁶ *Practical Water*, 5.

SAD provides a strong figure amongst our available “semiotic technologies”⁷ for understanding what it means to live in the Anthropocene. While Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) appears in the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a widely-used classificatory system) as a specifier of a Major Depressive Episode, my intention in invoking it as a way to read Hillman’s poetry is not to treat it as a pathology through which to understand the author or even the lyric subject, but rather as a way to conceptualise how Hillman’s poetry treats the affective interrelation of human with environment in the Anthropocene. Defined as a seasonal pattern of depression caused by an inordinate sensitivity to seasonal changes (in light or in temperature, for example), SAD anchors subjectivity to the material world through affect in interesting ways. As with many ‘disorders,’ one might ask what the ‘normal’ state of affairs could possibly be in which a living organism could remain unaffected by changes in its environment. Nevertheless, on a relative scale of imperviousness, SAD indicates sensitivity to seasonal changes to a degree that can be disabling. People with SAD (or who *are* SAD, to follow the persistent punning of headlines) are strongly affected by the environment. Today, however, disordered affect might be the more sensitive or appropriate response to seasonal changes that are increasingly out-of-order. What is the non-pathological or appropriate poetic response to a silent spring? To violent and unpredictable weather patterns? To the flooding of a coastal city? Perhaps the disordered response is the sane response to environmental destruction.

And the disorder goes both ways. I want to explore the term in another possible light; SAD might also be used to describe the state of the environment itself in the Anthropocene, and the environment, like people with SAD, may in fact have a heightened sensitivity to the pressures of the human population. The ability to affect and be affected belongs to people and the environment, and both sides might be considered not only co-constituting, but also disordered in the current state of affairs. In poems like “Dioxin Sunset,” harm is distributed and difficult to isolate on the side of either people or the environment, since they are intertwined and both at risk. Nature poetry cannot continue unchanged in the Anthropocene. Fragmented lines and syntactic indeterminacy register a poetic shift reflecting that disordered seasons can cause disordered affect. Once an exalted art of the human realm, poetry can be seen, increasingly, as a material and inhuman phenomenon, as well as a useful technology through which to explore interrelations.

Along with the figure of SAD, I draw on the literary theory of Timothy Morton and, from different disciplines, the theory of the material-semiotic fold advanced by Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett, to explore the materiality of language especially apparent in this poetry. Hillman has addressed the affective intertwining of human and hurt environment in her most recent series; she has written three collections of poetry each modeled on one of the traditional elements: earth, air, and water. The elements, in these collections, are treated not as passive or inert matter through which life can move and take form, but as active, or ‘vibrant’ matter. Bennett theorises matter as having vitality; she explains, “By ‘vitality’ I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”⁸ This theory of matter underlies Hillman’s approach to the

⁷ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 579.

⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

elements; in focusing on earth, air, or water, she allows that element to become agential in the linguistic and physical environment in which actions are made possible or meaningful. In this approach, then, language itself can be thought of as “vibrant matter,” that is “material, specific, non-self-identical, and semiotically active.”⁹ Haraway explains how material and semiotic interrelate: “Never purely themselves, things are compound; they are made up of combinations of other things coordinated to magnify power, to make something happen, to engage the world, to risk fleshly acts of interpretation.”¹⁰ In Morton’s terms, things operate, like language, as “self-assembling sets of interrelations in which information is directly inscribed [. . .] nothing but relationality, deep down.”¹¹

Cascadia (earth) employs “geological syntax” to layer personal rifts, faults, and depressions with geological ones; *Pieces of Air in the Epic* breathes lyric into spaces between lines and words of the epic genre; and *Practical Water* uses flowing syntax and “hydrolics” to explore California’s geography and history. More than conceits, the elements become organising principles that determine the form of the poems. Hillman’s use of the elements is a way of letting the environment into the poems, blurring the inside/outside distinction. Calling attention to the material structure of lines of poetry creates an attunement to the environment in the form of sounds, structures, and spacing. Far from producing classical symmetry, Hillman’s use of the four elements draws attention to the contamination of each by the other, and of all by chemicals like dioxin and gasoline. Hillman works with a theory that affect belongs equally to the human and nonhuman world, and that what Jane Bennett calls “affective catalysts”—which can include all things, matter, even language—are all involved in the production of affect: “This power is not transpersonal or intersubjective but impersonal, an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons [. . .] Organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects (these distinctions are not particularly salient here) *all* are affective.”¹² In highlighting how we are made up of and surrounded by the elements, Hillman creates a poetics of environment that demonstrates an openness to being affected by (often depressed by) the environment, rather than deploying its elements in the service of a transcendent meaning. Poetry is a medium that heightens the openness of language to things and to environment, as well as the ability of language to affect and to be affected by its elements.

***Cascadia*: Shaky Ground, Shaken Subject**

“Physical earth reveals itself as persons”¹³

The first installment of Hillman’s elements series, *Cascadia* (2001), uses what she calls “geological syntax” to explore how language, humans, and the earth are mutually shaped and shaping. This collection ranges across the geography and geology of California, exposing layers of prehistoric and historical eras that have accumulated to form its physical and ideological terrain. Hillman uses the figuration of earthquakes, faults, mining, agriculture, and toxins to explore the geological interrelations of humans (and the poetic subject) with the land. This

⁹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 250.

¹⁰ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 250.

¹¹ Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology,” *PMLA* 125, no. 2 March (2010): 273-82.

¹² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xii.

¹³ Hillman, “The Shirley Poem,” *Cascadia*, 36.

interrelation cannot be mistaken for any kind of utopian notion of harmony or balance; poetic subject and interrelated land are troubled, unstable, and wounded in an era in which human populations have become a geological force. Morton argues that the appearance of “natural” harmony can be an effect of time scale: “Things only look as if they fit, because we don’t perceive them on an evolutionary or a geologic time scale.”¹⁴ Hillman experiments with thinking and writing in alien and inhuman time scales in order to de-naturalise our relation to the land. Naturalised ideologies involving manifest destiny and the California dream can tend to overlay the landscape of California; “geological syntax” exposes the faults in this kind of thinking.

A striking effect of relating lived experience to geology is that temporalities collide. *Cascadia* (named after the sea that once formed much of California) imagines radically different biological and geological time scales. The earth is addressed, for example, in the poem “Moths Walking Along”: “After a million years you drew a breath // Paused till it seemed more accurate / Not to.”¹⁵ In these lines, the addressee is granted the capacity to pause, to breathe, and to decide on its own movements. If the earth here is being addressed in the second person, a traditional way of reading these lines would be to label them an example of anthropomorphism and move on, having “read” the poem by identifying the trope. However Paul de Man’s article “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric” treats anthropomorphism as “not just a trope but an identification on the level of substance”; de Man shows that anthropomorphism is far from a settled, one-for-one exchange, and more like an unsettling set of ontological substitutions.¹⁶ The ontology of human and that of supposedly inanimate thing are destabilised in the trope, demonstrating the indeterminacy of both terms. In this poem, the address to one who can pause for “a million years” casts the addressee as a different kind of being, as if an evolving species were able to maintain a single consciousness and act on a geological or evolutionary time scale. Addressing the earth in the second person leads to a transformation in thought and time scale for the poetic subject as well as for the “anthropomorphized” earth.

The poem “Sediments of Santa Monica” also profoundly recasts the poetic subject in relation to geological time. In an odd transposition of a British shoreline on a Californian beach, “Sediments” takes as its intertext a canonical British poem, Matthew Arnold’s 1867 “Dover Beach,” known for its assessment of its own time in a survey of the landscape through the lens of human belief. Hillman continues with the possibilities opened up in “Dover Beach” of exploring the limits of the pathetic fallacy. A Californian beach is viewed through the lens of a canonical English poem; the sun never sets on this indeterminate, globalised setting. An informal version of a glosa, “Sediments” intersperses italicised versions of the line from “Dover Beach,” “*Ah love let us be true to one another*” with its own lines, gradually fragmenting it into parts:

Ah love The century
 Had become a little drippy at the end

 We’re still growing but the stitches hurt *Let us be*
True to one another for the world (3)

¹⁴ Morton, “Queer Ecology,” 279.

¹⁵ “Moths Walking Along,” *Cascadia*, 67.

¹⁶ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 241.

This last line never allows the prepositional phrase “for the world” to be completed in Arnold’s manner. Rather than determining the world to have “neither joy, nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain”¹⁷ as in “Dover Beach,” Hillman’s glosa leaves this line hanging, in indeterminate relation to “us” whose “stitches hurt.” Like Arnold’s open poetic stanzas, these lines remain open to interpretation. Should we be true to one another “for the world,” (for its sake), or has the line been cut off due to the open-ended question of what the world is or does? Hillman’s version departs from Arnold’s in that it does not stage a scene of human viewers beholding the “world” pensively through a window, from above, but distributes watching, affect, and agency: “A left margin watches the sea floor approach // It takes 30 million years / It is the first lover” (3). Compared to Arnold’s “Ah love,” addressed to the beloved who is exhorted to “Come to the window” and view the scene outside framed by it, the “first lover” here is the “sea” itself.¹⁸ No longer the object of contemplation invoked by the human lover in his plea to the beloved, the sea has the agency and the feelings of a lover, but acts in geological time. “A left margin” might be a margin of a tectonic plate active in forming California geologically, or a page margin active in forming California conceptually. The margin, either way, does the watching, drawing our attention to the book itself, displacing the viewpoint from the human poetic gaze to the left margin itself along which the words are aligned.

Such attention to the space and material of the page is an example of what Timothy Morton calls “ecomimesis,” a term he defines thus: “Ecomimesis involves a poetics of *ambience*. Ambience denotes a sense of a circumambient, or surrounding, *world*.”¹⁹ And the surrounding world, as Morton goes on to argue, involves the writing itself in its material presence:

Notice how the black marks on this page are separated from the edge by an empty margin of blank paper? When ecomimesis points out the environment, it performs a medial function, either at the level of content or at the level of form. *Contact* becomes *content*. Ecomimesis interrupts the flow of an argument or a sequence of narrative events, thus making us aware of the atmosphere “around” the action or the environment in which or about which the philosopher is writing [. . .] This undermines the normal distinction we make between medium as atmosphere or environment – as a background or “field” – and medium as a material thing – something in the foreground. In general ambient poetics seeks to undermine the normal distinction between background and foreground.²⁰

Rather than Arnold’s Victorian figure contemplating the seascape outside of the window through relatively clear or “transparent” language, the materiality of language is highlighted here as part of the poem’s “ecomimesis,” and the viewer and viewed are mixed up, confounding the background/foreground distinction: “A left margin watches the watcher from Dover // After the twentieth century these cliffs / Looked like ribbons on braids or dreads”

¹⁷ Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach,” in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Sixth ed., Vol. 2, ed. Abrams et al. (New York: Norton, 1993), 1366-7, (33-4).

¹⁸ Arnold, “Dover Beach,” 29, (6).

¹⁹ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 33.

²⁰ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 38.

(3). Traits normally used for human self-fashioning are used in the description of the “cliffs” in distinctly twenty-first century, postmodern mixing of sublime and ridiculous, of viewed landscape and human viewer. There can no longer be any cosmetic clearing of the beaches of human presence for detached contemplation; the human population has become thoroughly interwoven with the conditions of observation and even with the physical characteristics of the beach (including the rising sea levels and temperatures and the plastic that washes ashore). And affect is correspondingly confused; how are we to feel, exactly, about the human-saturated aesthetic of “these cliffs”? Although this separation of viewer from viewed landscape has never been complete or absolute, it is one that seems even less tenable in the Anthropocene.

“El Niño Orgonon” uses another form of “geological syntax,” casting the ocean in an agential role in relation to language and climate change: “the ocean has decided to rearrange / its syntax” (4). The horizon of the visible and thinkable world, in this poem, is produced in a material-semiotic process: “A horizon is a / type of sentence unmaking syntax” (4). Ecomimesis here involves recognition of systems in disarray by thinking about how they author such disarray: “Weather taught / you to write funny. When it stops / being wrecked, we’ll write normally” (5). Climate change can be approached as syntactical rearrangement, a “sentence unmaking syntax,” but at the same time, Hillman reminds us of the role of human actions in climate change: “They could have / turned off air-conditioning as they climbed / the hills, we could have been // less comfortable in hotels” (5). The highly visible technology of writing, here, makes critique possible, just as technologies such as air-conditioning have made climate change possible. Relational action that works against climate change will involve recognition of the active role things and technologies like language play in any such change.

The central figure of “El Niño Orgonon” is “El Niño” or “the boy,” indeterminately a child, a Christ figure, and a way of figuring an out-of-the-ordinary weather pattern, while “Orgonon” refers to a vitalist theory of a universal ‘life-force’ or ‘orgone energy’ proposed in the 1930s by psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. While his theory is disregarded today, there is a sense in which the notion of the “orgonon” remains, for example, in meteorology when it relies on figurations like “El Niño” to conceptualise weather patterns as motivated as if by a kind of life force. However, this concept remains figural, and Hillman’s form of materialism corresponds more closely with Bennett’s contention that “impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement or ‘life force’ added to the matter said to house it. Mine is not a vitalism in the traditional sense; I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body.”²¹ Affect, in this formulation, is not ‘orgone energy’ or vitalism that is in any way separable from materiality, nor is it a property of an individual. Rather than a supernatural life-force, “El Niño” is a material-semiotic construct affecting and affected by climate change. In this poem, Hillman figures the agency and motivation of the environment through its co-constituted inhabitant, a literal and figurative boy who poignantly “wants his ocean to stop melting.” “El Niño” is both weather and child, so interrelated that “the boy plays insane / music in its [the weather’s] head” (5). “El Niño,” the boy, is SAD; he is both made up of a disordered weather pattern (a seasonal disorder), and equally he is in a state of affective disorder.

Another way of apprehending tensions, conflicts, and fractures within both the land and the human subject is through the figure of the fault line. Faults are explored at length as

²¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

anthropo-geographical sites of tension in “A Geology” and “Cascadia” which bookend the collection, both based on California road trips. In the long poem “A Geology,” travelers are on a modern-day road trip, quitting drugs and seeking healing as they range over the terrain of California, encountering its history through its geology. In Morton’s analysis of the poem, geology and the addiction narrative are inseparable; “It is impossible to determine which layer has priority,” or, “to use a geological figure, the bedrock.”²² For the travelers, “What it felt like to have been a subject” (14) is a faint memory; they realise in a number of ways that drugs have more agency than they do, and drugs are described as quitting them. “What it felt like to have been a subject,” further, is echoed in the last line of the long poem, “What it felt like to have been earth” (14). These repeated phrases insist on revisiting lost feelings and subjectivities. The earth, by implication, may once have felt whole and separable from “a subject” with a sense of integrity; as that integrity has crumbled in the self-unmaking of addiction and recovery, the “earth” becomes affectively mixed up with the fragments of the former subject in another instance of SAD.

Hillman acknowledges the overuse of the language of earthquakes as metaphors for emotional upheaval; in “A Geology” she notes wryly that it is “Tempting to pun on the word fault” (14). Risking cliché, however, she develops the full implications of this material-semiotic link between geology, affect, and language. California’s fault lines are treated as literally and figuratively composing the land: “There are six major faults, there are skipped / verbs, there are more little / thoughts in California” (8); “A california // is composed of moving toward, away, or past; a / skin is not separate; a poem is // composed of all readings of it” (10). In these lines, California’s fault lines give it the agency to compose and to construct the verbs, the thoughts and the syntax of the poem, which is “composed of all readings of it.” The way in which the land composes itself by moving “toward, away, or past” determines the ways we can possibly move through it, and lays out the range of possible readings and interpretations:

The number of faults in middle California
is staggering—that is, we stagger
over them till it’s
difficult to follow our own. Each tremor
is the nephew of a laugh—²³

Tremors, emanating indeterminately from the body or from the earth, are a form of affect in that they are not only of dispersed or indeterminate origin, but they are felt before being folded into interpretation. The “nephew of a laugh” is some kind of affective state, but not part of any kind of clear emotional narrative. When a tremor is felt, we often ask, “did you feel that?” before we decide whether or not we have really felt an earthquake.

Fault lines and fractures are represented pictorially in the breaks through and between words in the poems. “Hydraulic Mining Survey” is laid out like geological layers. It has a section printed sideways that invokes mountaintop removal: “Whole cliffsides moved in salmon paths” (8) is among the lines printed sideways. This manmade fault line is shown pictorially, as is the following one from the poem “Cascadia”: “The / caused flagrant slipping / *Sing sank sunk* in the Something-ocene” (55). Here Hillman alludes to the Anthropocene (as a

²² Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 42.

²³ “A Geology,” 12.

new and debated designation, the “Something-ocene”), while again relating linguistic to material shifts in the earth. In “Pre-uplift of the Sierra” the fault line is figured as a “palm being read” and as a “heartline,” (46) both metaphors that attempt to read lines in the body or in the earth to tell the future (when will the fault slip?) and indicators of feelings that remain below the surface and out of the subject’s control. Through these fault metaphors depression is used in both affective and geological senses; when “A piece of the left margin slipped under the sea” (50) the earth becomes literally depressed, as is further brought out in the lines, “Yes by marking on white / The mindless happiness // Yes then a crater of yeses / A mindless mindless depression” (51). “Depression,” here, is the “crater of yeses,” the inverse of affirmation, of “mindless happiness”; the earth’s depression becomes our own. Mountaintop removal results in exactly such a depression.

Along with faults, another layer of the earth that concerns Hillman is the layer of toxins and pollution in the atmosphere and biomass that, although human-made, has become a problem of geological proportions. A toxin or contaminant in the environment is ‘matter out of place’ to an even greater degree than dirt (to echo Mary Douglas’ formulation). Jane Bennett calls for more attention to these matters, asking us to consider “how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due. How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or ‘the recycling,’ but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?”²⁴ “Dioxin Promenade” is among the poems of this collection to grapple with the inhuman timeframe of environmental pollution. Environmental toxins in the earth (especially dioxin), Styrofoam, plastic, and oil are all treated as problems for any potential for balance that may have been promised by a theory of the elements. Such ‘elements’ of the environment are increasingly being noticed, in works such as Evelyn Reilly’s *Styrofoam*, for example. In elemental theory, health of the body and the land can be achieved through the right balance of earth, air, fire, and water, through putting the elements in their proper place and in proper relation, but in this poem Hillman implies that such balance cannot always be achieved, and that metaphorical comparisons of toxins and pollutants to states of the body don’t work. The embodiment of the poem is like Stacy Alaimo’s “trans-corporeality” in that it involves “the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors.”²⁵ The poem attempts a simile and fails: dioxin is “like” dance steps, “but dancesteps / won’t build up over time” (22). Although it is not “like” the body, dioxin “likes” the body: “Dioxin / likes breast milk” and it “stays in a body // seven years, a lump forms in / the friendly tissue near her heart” (22). Similes work in sinister ways in the poem’s understanding of environmental contaminants. In an instance of what Heather Houser calls “eco-sickness,” the interaction of a toxic contaminant with the body crosses boundaries and the “affects of sickness” cause a “conceptual and material breakdown of the body-environment boundary.”²⁶

As in my reading of “Dioxin Sunset” above, dioxin cannot be “resolved” in the body any more than it can be “resolved in the mind”. Dioxin cannot be broken down and eliminated quickly enough, but builds up in a process similar to the building up of mercury in

²⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

²⁵ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

²⁶ Heather Houser, “Wondrous Strange: Eco-Sickness, Emotion, and *The Echo Maker*,” *American Literature* 84, no. 2 June (2012): 381-408.

the ecosystem or of CO₂ in the atmosphere; it might be included in the class of what Morton calls “*hyperobjects*, products such as Styrofoam and plutonium that exist on almost unthinkable timescales.”²⁷ Dioxin has a long half-life, and its own half-life interferes with and changes the life span of an organism, making the question, “What is the half-life of having one?” (46) difficult to answer. And the illnesses caused by elements like dioxin lead to a melancholy and properly SAD question: “or you life tired of being cured // How many layers / Of giving up are there” (25).

Another contemplation of the permanence of environmental pollutants, “Styrofoam Cup” has as its intertext John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The full poem reads:

thou still unravished thou
thou, thou bride

thou unstill,
thou unravished unbride

unthou unbride (21)

Keats’ ode is famously a meditation on permanence and impermanence that takes as its central figure an urn painted with figures seemingly frozen in time by the immortalising power of art; the poem addresses the frozen figures on the urn with a mixture of envy and pity. “Styrofoam Cup” might be thought of as the palinode to Keats’ ode, retracting many of its terms. The palinode is a form that claims a magical power to retract the harm done by a prior statement; Stesichorus’ palinodes, for example, retract his slander against Helen of Troy, restoring his sight and reversing his punishment. Such magical powers are being invoked in “Styrofoam Cup,” in a desire to heal the environment by ‘taking back’ our wishes for and creation of a virtually immortal substance, Styrofoam. This poem’s wish is for *decomposition*, for the ability to “unbride” one particle from another. Just as the “bride of quietness” (both the figure of the bride and the urn itself) in Keats’ ode remains “unravished” throughout the centuries, the pure, bridal white of Styrofoam remains eerily “unravished” by the earth and the elements in what Evelyn Reilly calls its “Styrofoam deathlessness.”²⁸ A container meant, ironically, to be disposable rather than cherished in a museum like the urn, the Styrofoam cup is unable to return to the earth, frozen into an abject form, only slowly releasing its chlorofluorocarbons. Don McKay writes of plastics, “We inflict our rage for immortality on things, marooning them on static islands; and then, frequently enough, we condemn them as pollutants. Why are the fixed smiles on Barbie Dolls and Fisher Price toys so pathetic?”²⁹ In order to revoke this curse we have cast in plastic, Hillman turns to incantation: “unthou unbride”. Following in the tradition of environmental poetry that uses incantation (think of Ann Waldman’s incantation, “I bind the ash-tree / I bind the yew / I bind the willow / I bind uranium”) this poem casts a spell to undo Keats’ invocation of immortality of which Styrofoam is a logical extension.³⁰ Instead of

²⁷ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 19.

²⁸ Evelyn Reilly, *Styrofoam* (Berkeley: Roof Books, 2009), 9.

²⁹ Don McKay, *Vis a Vis: Fieldnotes on Poetry & Wilderness* (Moncton: Gaspereau Press, 2001), 20-1.

³⁰ Anne Waldman, *Makeup on Empty Space* (Iowa: Toothpaste Press, 1984), 47.

an invocation or apostrophe (o thou), here we have a plea/command revoking the apostrophe: “unthou.”

Considering the form eco-feminism might take, Val Plumwood notes, “It is usually at the edges where the great tectonic plates of theory meet and shift that we find the most dramatic developments and upheavals.”³¹ A shift happens when theoretical paradigms like ecology and affect collide, and new ways of understanding the earth become available. What does such an approach to geology teach us in *Cascadia*? In the Anthropocene, we are ourselves a geological force, and so what we learn from geology comes not only in the form of metaphor, but also, simultaneously, as literal self-discovery; we are the elements of which we are made, including language, particles of earth, sediments from ancient rivers. Unpacking layers of human meaning and layers of geology involves considering the layers of the material and the semiotic. The beach and the paving stones, so to speak, are layered all the way down; there is no single foundational layer that can fix meaning. As Hillman puts it, “A geology can’t fix itself. Nor can description” (11). It can, however, and does, move us deeply.

Pieces of Air in the Epic: What is (the) Matter?

*I held its breath:
air coming from half-states
it has visited where
dread meets ecstasy’s skid-mark*³²

Hillman’s second collection in the elements series takes air as its subject and space of composition. Following *Cascadia*’s focus on the element of earth, *Pieces of Air in the Epic* highlights a much less concrete material element. The collection develops an ecopoetics of affect in the sense that it makes space for the surrounding element of air and explores the ways it can stir “half-states” of affect. Hillman argues that “Earlier thinkers thought of air / As a mist not a context” (13) —that is, in Morton’s sense of ambience, as substance rather than void, figure rather than ground – and Hillman searches the archives for its presence. This search (in negative space) requires an adjustment of vision: “I looked below / the air behind the paintings” and “I made my eyes pointy to look at air in / corners” (58). Even when unacknowledged, air can be found in the negative spaces of literary form and even the library itself, making up the very space in which forms like the epic are able to “take place.” Air, in the middle of the epic genre, comes to be aligned with the lyric genre, the principle of music, song, and breath. In highlighting this element, Hillman pauses the epic, refusing to let its triumphal narratives unfold smoothly. Instead of action and plot, the lyric moments, the stillnesses, the spaces between words come to the foreground. We become aware that air has material content; it is actually made of gases and particles, and a lively interaction of all elements happens in air:

³¹ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

³² Brenda Hillman, “Wind Treaties,” *Pieces of Air in the Epic* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 21.

There
There is

A river that would drink water
An earth that would walk dirt
A fire that would singe flame
In that air (44)

Why make the air visible? Perhaps no traditional element is more often relegated to background, or negative space, than air. For this reason, striking effects are achieved by making it visible, tangible, audible—noticeable in some way—in poetry. Focusing on air brings the backdrop into view in the foreground, allowing the poet to reconsider the place of the lyric subject in her environment, ultimately blurring those boundaries in an affective transfer. This project can be thought of as aiming to de-naturalise oppressive hierarchies in which nature is defined “as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the ‘environment’ or invisible background against which the ‘foreground’ achievements of reason or ‘culture’ (provided typically by the white, western male expert or entrepreneur) take place.”³³ As Barbara Johnson and others have noted, consigning the feminine to the ground against which figures can appear is one way that gender ideology is encoded in aesthetics, and so the aesthetic work of making the background visible is a feminist poetic project.³⁴ It is also an ecological project, as the invisibility of air is often also the invisibility of air pollution.

A work that shares in this project and that is therefore quite closely related to *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, is Juliana Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. In it, Spahr develops at a meditative pace an awareness of negative space: “There is space between the hands. / There is space between the hands and space around the hands. / There is space around the hands in the room.”³⁵ Like a mobius strip, the space around becomes the space within; the poem develops through a slow, expanding series of repetitions to include the environment within the breathing individual:

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room and the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and the space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere and the space of the mesosphere in and out.³⁶

Adding layers to her writing slowly like sediments, Spahr develops this sense of continuity between outer space and inner space through a meditative but insistent series of iterations. This awareness of what might have otherwise been ignored as negative space involves a focus on the air’s particles, its existence as matter, as “nitrogen and oxygen and water vapor and argon and carbon dioxide and suspended dust spores and bacteria mixing inside of everyone with

³³ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 4.

³⁴ Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³⁵ Juliana Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

³⁶ Spahr, *This Connection*, 8.

sulfur and sulfuric acid and minute silicon particles from pulverized glass and concrete."³⁷ These last particles, the vaporised detritus from the events of September 11th (referred to in the poem's date/title) are simultaneously politically meaningful on a large scale and (sickeningly) minute enough to be incorporated invisibly through the air, causing harm to the lungs.

Both Spahr and Hillman focus on the lively material powers contained in air, and they do so as an intervention in political conflicts that impact the environment. Hillman's focus on "air in the epic" is a poetic intervention in war and conflict as theorised in the epic form. The action or plot of epic poses action figures against the backdrop, the air. The air, like the sea, in itself "has no plot" (13) and is assumed not to "matter" in the way that the actions that make up most historical narratives or epics matter. And yet air, in the form of wind, is only to be ignored by epic heroes at their peril; Odysseus is held captive or moved along in his adventures by wind, and the still air delays Agamemnon's voyage to Troy, as "Iphigeneia waits for winds to start" (8). The daughter to be sacrificed represents the feminine principle in epic, matter sacrificed to action or plot. Material is mobilised in the construction of war's plot and its history: "As you enter the moving aura of the epic" (46) the plot can tend to sweep matter up into "action's air collection" (10). But like the center of a hurricane, the "Center of the epic" (46) is still. In this pause, "Side stories leaked into the epic, / told by its lover, the world. / The line structure changed" (8).

In "Air in the Epic," the "line structure" changes to make way for spaces; the poem is divided into columns, single spaced on the left and double spaced on the right; the right column has more "air" or space between the lines. Air or space can so easily fade into the background that the right column relies on the more tightly spaced left column to make its spaces visible. Other motifs in this collection include breath and singing, in which air is expressed outward or drawn in, and fabric, material, fibers, threads, which form the material structure to hold the "pieces" of air. Reading for the poetics of space in these lines is essential to apprehending an element that is so easily seen as mere backdrop to content.

Climate change, like "air in the epic" causes winds that contain a warning: "On the under-mothered world in crisis, / the omens agree" (8); we are "between / history and an endish / time" (11-2). Dominant ideologies that tend to privilege epic plot (and whose "history" has led us to this "endish / time," the Anthropocene) can be found everywhere, as can denial of the agential role of wind and air: "Their / president says global warming doesn't exist. / Some winds seem warmer here" (8). An unstable ground for knowledge claims, air can only be seen in its relation to its surrounding elements, and yet it is often where things are happening: "in / the summer air around / each thought, something is / built and avoided" (32). These lines evoke "the summer air" to point the reader toward a poetics of space, to think about what else might surround "each thought" and each poetic line or stanza. Air is clearly not an easy form of matter to apprehend, but it is matter that moves us and mobilises change.

Practical Water: A Political Ecology

"propitiatory / dawns make emotions matter"³⁸

Practical Water (2009) brings together water and environmental politics, a connection that feels entirely natural in California. The setting of these poems, California has been both physically

³⁷ Spahr, *This Connection*, 9-10.

³⁸ Brenda Hillman, "Pacific Ocean," *Practical Water* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 26.

and culturally shaped by what is fittingly called “Water and Power,” a term that can be understood not only to designate a department of local government, but also to indicate the close relation between water and power in the broadest sense. California is a state that struggles to distribute scarce water resources fairly, amounting to an ongoing “water war” in which local ecosystems frequently lose out. Local politics are often the focus of intense battles over environmental issues, and in the rest of the nation California has come to stand for an outlandish over-concern with the environment, on the one hand, and a failure to live up to its own lofty goals, on the other. Many of the poems of *Practical Water* are site-specific works set in California, and they center on politically contentious uses of water, including struggles over the control of local waterways. The long poem “Hydrology of California: An Eco-poetical Alphabet” explores the waterways of California much as the roadways and geological formations were explored in *Cascadia*. Our own dependence on water implicates us in the politics of its distribution: “You drink gallons of it you know you do” (85). Hillman writes, “Mulholland / stole her water/ L.A. poets knew it power rhymes w/shower / poor Mojave River & Earth will know the source” (94) and photographs incorporated throughout the poem show the thorough intermixing of human with water in the shaping of the state of California.

One poem acts like a petition or at least a poetic intervention in the poet’s local politics of water use: titled “Request to the Berkeley City Council Concerning Strawberry Creek,” and subtitled “(after George Herbert),” (76) the concrete poem forms the shape of the letters BS (one letter on each facing page). Either the colloquial accusation of ‘bullshit’ aimed at a political rival, or perhaps B for Berkeley, S for Strawberry Creek (and the S has an extra curve, making it resemble a stream), the poem’s shape echoes its content, namely a contestation over who owns letters and by extension language. Language is treated as an ecosystem in *Practical Water*, and like water in California, its distribution is treated as a political decision about the flow of power. A long string of initials is listed, each initial appearing along with the “s” of ownership, standing for individuals’ claims to a local waterway, and the students and writers of Berkeley are set within their habitat: “We swear by the seven / creeks of Berkeley, as by our poetry” (76) (the space between “our” and “poetry” forms a hole for the letter B’s shape). The “petition” of this letter is initialed by those “who write little or much, in water as in poetry” (76). Their claim is an affective one: “Some have a moment of mood when they stand on the bridge / near the U.C. Life Sciences Building” (77); ultimately, the separation of public/political systems like economy from supposedly “inner” or private emotions is rejected: “economy & strains of longing come from the same / place” (76). This place, Strawberry Creek, is a contested terrain, and Hillman and her “co-signers” stake their claim to it based on an affective and nonetheless collective affinity.

Hillman’s affective approach to place, here, amounts to what Sara Ahmed calls a “politics of emotion”³⁹ or what Jane Bennett terms “political ecology”. Bennett argues that environmental politics cannot be understood without considering the affects of involvement: “There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects.”⁴⁰ Houser, likewise, argues that “[w]e cannot understand environmentality in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries without exploring how affect guides the steps between

³⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.

perception, awareness, and action."⁴¹ The "moment of mood" that Hillman links to Strawberry Creek is in this sense part of an affective "political ecology." In the political poems of *Practical Water*, Hillman performs an inhospitality to the usual operations of politics by denying the meanings being attributed to "a bunch of words." While letters are used in the Strawberry Creek poem to petition for change and to initial a claim, in other poems letters and their sounds are denied their normal use for politicians, taken apart into their smallest units in which they cannot be used to "make sense" and advance an argument. What Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic element of language is brought out in the series of political poems that comprise part II of *Practical Water*.⁴² In an essay beginning this section, "Reportorial Poetry, Trance & Activism: An Essay," Hillman suggests that her role as a dissenting poet in a political setting is to go into a trance and take notes:

Reportorial poetics can be used to record detail with immediacy while one is doing an action & thinking about something else. Experience crosses over with that which is outside experience; the unknown receives this information as an aquifer receives replenishing rain. [. . .] I recorded notes in Washington while attending hearings & participating in actions to make the record collective & personal. Working with trance while sitting in Congressional hearings i recorded details into a notebook. If bees can detect ultraviolet rays, there are surely more possibilities in language & government.⁴³

Hillman's reportorial writing here tracks multiple streams of consciousness at once, while interfering with the streamlined clarity of the proceedings. Attunement to other forms of experience here means reaching through simile and metaphor for modes of feeling like those of the "aquifer" or the "bees."

In the poem set "In a Senate Armed Services Hearing," Hillman records, "From my position as a woman / i could see / the back of the General's head, the prickly / intimate hairs behind his ears" (34). The poet's "position as a woman" means writing from a different perspective, in a form of *écriture féminine*. She records the smallest peripheral details in the scene: "Filaments rose from the carpet as the General spoke" (34). Focusing on lively materiality, here, is both ecomimesis and resistance to normative transcription. The politicians are denied the transcription of their *logos*, as "letters issued / from their mouths like *General I'd be interested / to know*, some of the letters regretted that" (35). Hillman feels that her role is to block the "progress" of the proceedings: "i forget who asked what isn't even / in the same syntax of this / language i'm trying to make no progress in" (35). The strategy of interfering with *logos*, or the ability to make sense, leads to breaking down speech into syllables evoking the semiotic, an attunement to the material elements of language: "The punctuation falling from your eyes its eyes their eyes his eyes / is merging with uh.. uh.. uh.. uh.. uh.. as he explains / the Pentagon budget" (43). Poetic civil disobedience consists in withholding the magical spell of language, which "Refused to spell. Till all the letters stopped / in astral light, in dark love for their human ones" (36). The power of spelling (in both senses) is halted, out of love. Hillman draws on the concept of *écriture féminine* when she notes, "i've read that women in remote villages in China / invented script men couldn't read" (39). The political

⁴¹ Houser, "Eco-Sickness," 382.

⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁴³ Hillman, "Reportorial Poetry, Trance and Activism: An Essay," *Practical Water*, 33.

poems are in a form of *écriture féminine*, holding language and letters back from use in the progress of *logos*.

Letters are reclaimed, however, and used as a source of power in the poem “Enchanted Twig”: “The diverted creek sounds sad so maybe i better / take our dowsing stick out to the field, for our Y will / pull & find buried water” (7). The letter i (lower case, indicating a reluctant subject), and the letter Y (upper case; also a pictogram of a divining rod) are called upon to help in seeking out “buried water.” Another group is called upon to join in a protest: “We miss / our mother. Dear mother, daughter, pilot, poet, sister, / student, teacher, waitress, worker, water girls & girlie men, don’t do / their war” (8). Instead of engaging in “their war,” these allies are asked to join in and “squint our ears to the babble” (9) of brooks, to refuse phallogocentric uses of language and tune in to the semiotic.

“Pacific Ocean” develops *écriture féminine* further, cultivating the semiotic element in its poetic form; extra space between words, recalling *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, here give a sense of waves as well as clouds: “A verbed set of dolphins scallop on by toward San Diego (Hi / Rae.) A cloud goes by, puff-, parallel to economics. Puff-puff” (29). The poem’s aim of evading logocentrism is suggested in the slip: “otters’ skins near Pt. Lobos —(almost wrote logos)” (27). In order to resist logocentrism, the poem repeatedly explores the potential of affect as a link between self and ocean: “i went to the ocean, my hydrogen host, was greeted in the negation of the moment finding itself; put my hand to the surface & felt // the surface of emotion”; “To feel emotion underneath emotion (a fertile dread / had mixed with ecstasy, not delight such as delight // in nature but of nature—a brew, a brink—);” (24). Emotion, dread, delight, ecstasy (even a hidden emoticon), indicators of affect, are addressed in these lines, and tears and laughter in the following: “An ocean has no summary in tears” (27) and “The tide was low & safe. Lots of low laughing to draw emotion in” (29). Neither tears nor laughter are fully articulated as emotion, remaining indeterminate affective states, “as if between emotions / there were livelier half-states” (18). Attention to these “half-states” can “induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality.”⁴⁴

The affective connection with the ocean is not a utopian retreat to pre-oedipal “oceanic feeling,” however, but links the subject of the poem with a sense of impending doom from an awareness of the harm being done to the ocean: “It is a long time before they’ll ruin you dumping phosphates” (25); “you are not ‘endangered’ yet” (26); “it is a while before / they’ll ruin you” (26). The ocean is composed both of the classic elements and manmade ones from “Methane to carbon”: “plank & plankton in minnows through plastic six-pack” (28). In the Anthropocene, these manmade elements have so filled the ocean that there are islands of tiny plastic pellets in what was once the ocean’s doldrums, now its dead zone. And this is the thoroughly depressing new ocean into which the subject wades:

Removed my hat, my shoes. China’s. Removed China’s shoes.
Socks. Removed China’s socks. Shirt from the Philippines,

hair thing from Korea; rings. Europe’s rings. Took off my
rings & walked in— (27)

⁴⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, x.

Removing layers of clothing produced by exploited human labor, however, does not get us back to an uncontaminated connection with the ocean. Instead of a smooth, oceanic rhythm, these lines are staccato and disconnected, bobbing together and apart like tiny fragments of plastic. The cleansing power of the ocean has been used by so many humans that the ocean is saturated with the human, at least as much as we are made up of it.

At the same time that the ocean is saturated with human and political meaning, it is of all the elements the most intuitively connected to embodiment for us as animals made up, after all, of around sixty percent water. Focusing on water creates a visceral and affectively-saturated sense that “Life-forms are liquid [. . .] life-forms constitute a *mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment.”⁴⁵ *Practical Water* demonstrates that “It’s hard to be water [. . .] but you must” (6). Requiring no shift in perspective at all, really, our being water is not an option. Being made up of water in the Anthropocene is not easy, though, and it can make us suffer from SAD to realise that the disordered weather we have created, in turn, disorders us.

Earth, air, water, and language: lively elements of Brenda Hillman’s ecopoetics, mobilised in a dance that delineates human and (inseparable) environment simultaneously. My readings of these works have suggested some ways the technology of poetic language can provide models of thought for apprehending the ways we affect and are affected by our ecologies.

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⁴⁵ Morton, “Queer Ecology,” 275-6.

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